



Book Review

Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania Across Empires. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă. 2022. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 270 pages, ISBN 978-1-5017-6574-2 Paperback (\$34.95)

Reviewed by José Itzigsohn

Brown University

jose_itzigsohn@brown.edu

Creolizing the Modern is one of the most important books published in the last years. The authors pose the question, “What does the world look from the standpoint of a small village in Transylvania, a village in East-Central Europe?” (3). I am not an expert on East-Central Europe, so I can’t discuss the specifics of the authors’ arguments concerning their case, though I can say I believe I learned a lot about the region from reading this book. Moreover, the book is very well written, and it is enjoyable to read (which is not always the case for academic books). But the reason this is an important book is because it proposes a methodology for thinking about the global through the local in the analysis of historical change. Furthermore, the book is written by a sociologist and a comparative literature scholar, and it makes a strong case for the value of the dialogue between the social sciences and the humanities.

The book aims to analyze what modernity meant in a small rural village in Transylvania. That is, the book looks at modernity not from the perspective of those places that usually define it—urban areas in the core of the world-system—but from the historical experience of a rural area in a semi peripheral region. It looks at the transformations of everyday life in the village and how those changes were linked to regional and global transformations in the capitalist world system. The authors’ indeed assert that “in addition to being a fascinating object of study, Transylvania’s



Articles in vol. 21(2) and later of this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System, University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

exemplarity can crystalize a methodology” (3). The book indeed does that and, as a result, it makes an important contribution to the building of a historically rooted social science and possibly also comparative literature.

Two key ideas guide the analysis. First, the idea of creolizing that the authors define as “a mode of transformation premised on the unequal power relations that characterize modernity/coloniality—dispossession, colonization, and enslavement.” The second key idea is interimperiality. The book argues that in order to understand creolized modernity in Transylvania we need to analyze it as being at the intersection of different empires—the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Habsburg, and the Ottoman empires—that vied for regional hegemony.

I write this review as a sociologist engaged in an epistemic project of decolonizing the discipline, and from this perspective, I would like to highlight two elements of the book methodology that are important for decolonizing sociology. The first one is the way the authors address the question of the relation between the local and the global and the relation between different regional logics in the world-system. The second element concerns the possibilities opened up by the collaboration between a social scientist and a comparative literature scholar, which poses questions of analytical methods sociology.

Concerning the first issue, the book looks at the world from a very local context, a small village, through the perspective of its embeddedness in regional political and economic processes and its relations with developments in other parts of the world system. In doing so it transcends methodological nationalism: the unit of analysis, the village, is not seen as contained in the historical national polity of which it is part now—Romania—but as part of a region shaped by contending empires. Yet, at the same time, it addresses the connection between this region with broader trends shaped by the North-Atlantic centered world-system. The analysis weaves nicely these different levels of analysis—the local, the regional and the global—showing that we can’t look at the changes in everyday life in the village without understanding these broader contexts. At the same time, it focusses on what is contingent and contextual to the village and the region that cannot be deduced from broader changes in the world-system.

The book helps me address an argument that I encounter often. The question is, if racial and colonial capitalism was shaped by the expansion of the western part of Europe first through the Atlantic and later on through the Pacific, how are we to address historical change in other parts of the world-system that are not part of its historically hegemonic region? *Creolizing Modernity* shows us how to do this, and, in doing so, the book embraces Du Bois’ call for emphasizing at the same time local heterogeneity and specificity and global entanglement.

The second issue I want to address is the collaboration between a sociologist and a comparative literature scholar. The structure of the argument combines the historical and sociological analysis of institutions, structures, and networks with the reading of novel about the village. The novel *Ion*, by Liviu Rebreanu, published in 1920, is a window to the social relations and transformations of the village. The authors use the novel as a source for the analysis of the case. On some issues, the analysis starts with the novel, taking issues from the novel’s narrative and expanding them using historical documents or statistics about life in the village. In other cases,

the authors start with a historical narrative and use the novel to illustrate or expand the analysis. The authors also use the novel to analyze forms of coloniality, that is, forms of knowledge and understanding the world created by colonialism in the Atlantic world, and inter-imperiality in Transylvania, in particular in relation to the discourses of nationalism, racism, and patriarchy.

When I started reading the book, as a social scientist, I wondered how this collaboration would work and if there was a real gain in combining social science sources with a novel. After reading the book I think it is one of its strongest points and a model to follow. If sociology wants to take seriously Du Bois' claim that sociology is about understanding human action, posing the hypothesis of law and the assumption of chance, then the dialogue with the humanities is the way to go. The collaboration between the social sciences and the humanities, as shown in the book, will help sociology improve the analysis of structure, history, and subjectivity. I asked the authors while discussing the book in a panel what brought them to this work together and their answer was that they are friends and wanted to write something together. To me their answer points to the value of letting shared interest and shared questions guide us in transcending limiting disciplinary boundaries and practices, which is central to any decolonizing project.

To sum up, *Creolizing Modernity* presents us with a methodology to study historical change addressing the connections between the local, the regional, and global contexts, and to combine the social sciences and the humanities in doing so. It is an outstanding book that deserves to be read and discussed widely.